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NORTHERN SHOSHONI CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS

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Long before anyone got around to settling the country that was eventually taken over by the Northern Shoshoni, a series of continental ice sheets expanded southward east of the Rockies across the Great Plains. During the fourth--and most recent--of these glacial sequences, people from Siberia had a chance to move into North America. So much seawater went into formation of vast ice fields that ocean levels declined and coastlines changed. In the process, Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia disappeared and became a land connection which united North America with Asia. Elephants from Asia gradually worked their way over this passage into Alaska, and big game hunters followed them. Over a period of thousands of years, North and South America were settled as population expanded and people adapted to new conditions. They had to avoid the ice fields as they moved across the continent. But much of the country adjacent to the ice sheet got plenty of moisture, and great interior lakes developed in the basins of places like Utah and Nevada. In the country between the continental ice sheet and these giant pluvial lakes, Asian elephants and some of the people who pursued them found the right kind of conditions in which they could thrive. And the environment they needed lasted in that part of the country for several thousand years.

People have lived in the Salmon River mountains and the Snake River plains--the traditional homeland of the Northern Shoshoni--for the past 14,000 years or more. During that time, major changes in climate have transformed the region more than once. With changes in climate came changes in population. Big game hunters adapted for survival in a colder, wetter era inhabited the Snake River plains one hundred and forty centuries ago. Then, as the country got warmer and drier, and the continental ice sheet (which never reached the Snake country, but came on by east of the Rockies) receded, population increased rapidly for a thousand years or more starting about 12,500 years ago. Around 8,000 years ago, the climate gradually got too hot and dry--eventually hotter and drier than any time since. So much of the big game left. Giant sloth and elephants no longer could be found after the lower plains turned into desert. Many of the early elephant hunters followed the game they were accustomed to pursue, moving north and east to stay with the cooler, wetter climate to which they had been accustomed. Other people stayed or moved into the area. But hunting conditions certainly changed. Buffalo and mountain sheep could be found at higher elevations, so the region's pioneer big game economy did not disappear entirely. Still, with movement and modification or replacement of early inhabitants, major cultural changes associated with climatic changes brought new ways of living to the peoples of the Snake River plain around 8,000 years ago.

Two differing cultural groups, tracing back about 8,000 years, gradually emerged over a thousand years or so in the Salmon River mountains and the Snake River plains.

One which developed, among other places, along the southern margin of these plains may be regarded as an archaeological expression of the modern Western Shoshoni. Farther north, the other (which may be traced on Birch Creek and identified on the Salmon below Shoup) offers 8,000 years of cultural continuity down to the time of the Northern Shoshoni. In the former, a desert way of life is more evident. In the latter, buffalo and other big game hunting were more pronounced. These characteristics continued to distinguish Northern from Western Shoshoni down to the days of the fur trade.

In the Snake River regional cultures (identified as Bitterroot to the north and South Hills to the south) eventually associated with the Northern and Western Shoshoni, new technologies distinguished life in the past 8,000 years from the pioneer big game hunters' economy which had flourished for 6,000 years or more earlier. Perhaps these innovations reflected an introduction of bows and arrows: in any case, some of the details of these changes still elude archaeologists who are reconstructing the story of life in the Snake country prior to the eighteenth century. Both regional cultural groups continued to subsist on big game, using buffalo jumps in the Owyhee country as well as in the Salmon River area. during the 8,000 years of regional cultural development, the climate went through a hot, dry era that interfered with occupation of the lower valley which became an arid desert by 5200 B.C. Gradually another cold wet phase set in, but by 1450 B.C. this second cycle was completed with another warm, arid sequence. Still another cold, wet climate emerged during a final cycle that extended until around 1850 A.D. In the middle of the nineteenth century--at the end of the fur trade era and at about the beginning of white settlement--a warming trend yielded the climate which persists to the present time. But the two regional cultures continued through these times of environmental change, in which Bitterroot culture gradually developed into the Northern Shoshoni way of life.

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